

Indian Students Go Greek

By DEEPANJALI KAKATI

Ethnic Indian university students in the United States have taken to the all-American tradition of fraternities and sororities.



Courtesy Delta Sigma Iota



Courtesy Delta Phi Beta

Their names are Greek, their rituals are closely guarded secrets, entry is by invitation only and members are solemnly bound to uphold principles such as unity, culture, discipline and community service. Student Greek organizations—fraternities for men and sororities for women living together in off-campus houses—have long been a part of university and college life for some students in the United States. The fraternities and sororities are called Greek because they use the Greek alphabet to form their names. They are known for developing a close-knit, exclusive community of friends and contacts that provides an instant social network during

university years and continues past graduation into the career and business world.

There are more than 12 South Asian “Greek” organizations in the United States and more than 90 percent of their members are of Indian origin. With chapters and colonies at different universities, these organizations take their social responsibilities quite seriously. “We always tell people that not every fraternity is like the ones you see on television” or in movies like *Animal House*, says Kevan Desai, president of the Delta Sigma Iota fraternity at Pennsylvania State University.

While there are still nights on the town, the South Asian Greeks also focus on community service. They support Salvation Army clothing drives, participate in Adopt-

From left: Delta Sigma Iota member Chetan Shah works in the garden of a home for the elderly near Pennsylvania State University; members of Delta Phi Beta, a co-ed fraternity, gather at the University of California, Los Angeles, for the Indian Student Union culture show; members of the Delta Kappa Delta sorority volunteer at a local mental hospital in Austin, Texas; brothers of Delta Sigma Iota joined other student organizations to help out the elderly at a care facility in Pennsylvania.

a-Highway programs and book drives, spread awareness about cancer, volunteer at hospitals, raise funds for victims of natural disasters in India and for charities.

“Many people view a fraternity as an outlet to party. We strive to show that our

primary focus is the community and betterment of South Asians,” says Anil Nair, a vice president of the Delta Epsilon Psi fraternity at the University of Texas in Austin. There are Indian student organizations on most campuses, so why have some chosen to join the Greek system? “In a regular student organization everyone is not on the same page, whereas in our fraternity everyone has the same focus and goals,” says Nair. He adds that there are professionally rewarding opportunities for new students through the extensive fraternity and sorority alumni network.

The first South Asian brotherhood was formed in 1994 by eight students of Binghamton University in New York. Four years later Kappa Phi Gamma, formed at

University of Texas in Austin. One of the challenges faced by new recruits, says Arthi Kodur, a vice president of the Delta Kappa Delta sorority, involves time management: how to handle schoolwork while participating in sorority activities.

At the start of the school year many students line up to try out for the organizations of their choice in a season traditionally called “rushing.” “Students gain a great deal by joining these organizations. They develop their leadership skills, perform community service and increase their knowledge of Asian American communities,” says Ajay T. Nair, associate director of the Asian American Studies Program at the University of Pennsylvania. Mainstream American fraternities and sororities are

The South Asian organizations have tried to forge their own identity within the Greek system. “They focus less on the social aspects of college life. Most minority fraternities/sororities have an interest in increasing political and social awareness of key issues impacting minority communities,” says Ajay Nair.

Some channel their philanthropy into special causes. The Chi Psi Beta fraternity at Texas A&M University provides money to pay for the education and other needs of an 8-year-old orphaned boy in India. To raise money for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, the Delta Epsilon Psi fraternity brings together 30 student organizations to compete in a football tournament called the Sugar-Free Bowl. Every year the fraternity also hosts a car-



the University of Texas in Austin, became the first South Asian interest sorority.

The history of Greek organizations in the United States goes back to the 18th century, when the Phi Beta Kappa Society was formed in 1776 at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Kappa Alpha Theta (1870) and Kappa Kappa Gamma (1870) were the first women's societies to use Greek letters.

In Greek organizations, new members are interviewed, tested and have to prove their dedication before they are inducted. “One of our policies is to restrict students from joining who have a grade point average below a certain level,” says Summit Walia, national board president of the Beta Kappa Gamma fraternity at the

beginning to see the value in Greek organizations that focus on issues impacting specific ethnic groups, he adds. “Many institutions have developed multicultural Greek councils to accommodate these diverse interest groups.”

Besides, these organizations help new students adapt to an unfamiliar environment, get to know more people of their community and work as a team. Shivani Seth, national executive president of the Sigma Sigma Rho sorority, feels it gives students of her generation a chance to combine their heritage and American culture. Delta Phi Beta, the first South Asian co-ed fraternity, helps members by hosting résumé-building seminars and quarterly workshops aimed at specific careers.

nival, called Project Come Together, with concerts, games and rides “to reward Austin’s youth for their hard work in the classroom.” The sixth carnival this year attracted 2,500 children. In April—declared National Child Abuse Prevention Month by President George W. Bush—all chapters of the Delta Kappa Delta sorority organized activities to create awareness about the issue. Proceeds from fundraisers were sent to CRY, UNICEF and other organizations in South Asia.

Cultural events are also important. This year Delta Epsilon Psi’s Festival of India featured Karmacy, an Indian American rap band from California, and Rasika Mathur, an Indian American comedienne. In 2003 Sigma Sigma Rho started an annual Greek

Muslim Sorority Opens New Doors for American University Women

In some people's minds, the "Greek system" of American University sororities and fraternities is synonymous with partying. But the system includes a huge variety of organizations, many of which encourage academic excellence and promote community service. A new national sorority founded on the principles of Islam seeks to build itself on that model.

Founded little more than a year ago, the Gamma Gamma Chi sorority has dedicated itself to giving young women the positive aspects of a sorority experience while maintaining Islamic traditions. While the group's core principles are Islamic, it opens its membership to all women, Muslim and non-Muslim, who support its mission.

though, Abdul-Haqq decided to form her own sorority based on Islamic values. Abdul-Haqq's mother, Althia F. Collins, a former college president and sorority member, threw herself into the dual role of president and executive director. Since then she has spent more than \$50,000 of her own money and time to launch the sorority.

One of the most challenging tasks for Gamma Gamma Chi has been raising awareness of its mission on American campuses. Collins and other supporters have visited many universities, hosting informal information sessions. Students dressed in everything from *chadors* to jeans and T-shirts have attended and taken an interest.

A student at the University of

nology and Gamma Gamma Chi board member, noting the important status of sororities at American universities, told *USA Today*, "It will give Muslim women a face and a voice on campus."

Collins told NPR, "This sorority, I thought, is an opportunity to help Muslim women to be able to develop leadership skills and to help each other through networking."

Gamma Gamma Chi makes its commitment to Islam clear in its motto: "Striving for the pleasure of Allah through sisterhood, scholarship, leadership and community service." Its six goals, or Golden Pillars, include Islamic awareness, education, support for the indigent, as well as health, social and environmental awareness. Chapters will follow Muslim practices and observe Islam's holy days. Collins says no alcohol will be served at sorority events and while members may work together with men on specific projects, there will be no men at their social gatherings.

Other students apparently agree with the leaders of Gamma Gamma Chi that this sorority fills a void among diverse student organizations on campus. Young Muslim women in 20 states have expressed interest in forming chapters of an organization where they can enjoy the company of women like themselves and show the best face of Islam.

Members of other sororities have also welcomed the new organization. Some have noted that a number of

Christian-based sororities have succeeded using similar models. Susan West, an administrator with the University of Kentucky, has championed the establishment of a Gamma Gamma Chi chapter at her campus, saying that the university welcomes women of all faiths. She told the *Voice of America*, "I think that GGC will give women a new opportunity. I have talked with women who are in sororities now, and they are excited to have a new group on campus that will bring something different to their sorority community."

The sorority has already passed an important milestone, establishing its first chapter in Atlanta, Georgia, where it serves women from a number of local universities and colleges. Chapters are forming in other American cities. The sorority's goal is to establish chapters in every region of the United States.

Collins speaks with confidence about the prospects for the work she and her daughter have started. "I can say how pleased I am with the interest and enthusiasm we've received," she says, adding, "Imani, my daughter, and I are honored that we could be the ones to give shape and life to an idea whose time has clearly come." □

Steve Holgate is a special correspondent for *Washington File*, a product of the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State (<http://usinfo.state.gov>).

From left:
Kimberly
Harper,
Imani Abdul-
Haqq, Althia
F. Collins and
Kesha Abdul-
Mateen of
Gamma
Gamma Chi.



Courtesy Gamma Gamma Chi

Gamma Gamma Chi is the inspiration of Imani Abdul-Haqq, a young Muslim woman who was dissatisfied with the sorority scene at her university in North Carolina. Instead of dismissing the entire system,

Kentucky, where a chapter of the sorority is being founded, told National Public Radio, "This is exactly what Islam is about." Christine Ortiz, a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Tech-

god and goddess pageant—Qayamat—which brings together six South Asian fraternities and sororities. For the past two years proceeds from this event have gone to the HELP Foundation (Health and Education for the Less Privileged) in India. Last year Delta Phi Beta held a cultural conference with all South Asian organizations at the University of California, Los Angeles. This was part of its effort to be "a culturally unifying force in the South Asian

community since our diverse membership allows us to do so," says Preethy Kolachalam, co-chair of the UCLA chapter.

Twelve years down the line some South Asians feel they have been accepted into the Greek system. Vishad Pathak, vice president of the Delta Sigma Iota fraternity, says the Greek community at Pennsylvania State University has taken their organization more seriously each year and Summit Walia of the Beta Kappa

Gamma fraternity feels people have realized that they are "interested in making the Greek as well as the surrounding community stronger."

Others feel there is more work to do. "We are still making a name for ourselves and we are not as prominent as other ethnic-based organizations. The opportunity is there and we are progressing every year," says Shivani Seth of Sigma Sigma Rho sorority. □